THE EVOLUTION OF BL AS "PLAYING WITH GENDER"

Viewing the Genesis and Development of BL from a Contemporary Perspective

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Introduction

It was about twenty years ago that I wrote the critical essay "Transgender: Female Hermaphrodites and Male Androgynes," in which I traced the genealogy of gender-bending in *shōjo* manga.[1] The article takes up the subversive use of "girls dressed as boys," "boys dressed as girls," "*shōnen'ai*" (boys love), "lesbians," and "polymorphous perversity" in *shōjo* manga, and goes on to compare the structure of such representation with what appeared in manga for boys and young men. The essay is included in my 1998 book *Where Do I Belong? The Shape of the Heart Reflected in Shōjo Manga* (*Watashi no ibasho wa doko ni aru no? Shōjo manga ga utsusu kokoro no katachi*).[2]

In the intervening twenty years, *yaoi* and "boys love" (*bōizu rabu*), both of which originally developed from *shōnen'ai*, have become increasingly established as genres in their own right and have been gradually taken up as a subject of study by more and more students and researchers. As the number of researchers examining *yaoi* and boys love has grown, so too has the number of references to the portions of my early essay focused on *shōnen'ai*. However, when I encounter such references to my work in Japan, I frequently find myself thinking: "What? Why are they classifying my writing that way?" Or: "There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding." Or: "I'm sure I didn't say anything like that." As I discuss below, while this might be due in part to obvious misunderstandings or bias on the part of authors quoting me, more than anything it is likely due to the fact that in the twenty years that have passed since I first wrote the piece, both the situation surrounding the topic and my own way of thinking about the topic have changed. Furthermore, despite their having emerged at different times in different media and possessing different generic qualities, from the very beginning the four distinct genres of "*shōnen'ai*," "*yaoi*," "BL (boys love)," and "*JUNE*" (explained below) have all been classed together as a single genre depicting "male–male romance." That the four genres have come to be theorized without clearly distinguishing between them has resulted in some confusion and misunderstanding, an issue also addressed by Kazuko Suzuki in this volume.

This chapter demonstrates how *yaoi* and BL developed from *shōnen'ai* and the magazine *JUNE* as an entertaining space in which women can "play with gender," and the constraints of oppressive female gender roles can be removed. To question what motivated the emergence of male–male romance in *shōnen'ai* and *JUNE* or how this plot device directed at women came about is completely different from asking what became possible once male–male romance was established as a device and further developed and conventionalized within the "*yaoi*" or "boys love" genres in terms of *seme–uke* (that is, top–bottom, or dominant–passive) couplings. I believe, therefore, that clearly distinguishing between these four genres—that is, *shōnen'ai*, *JUNE*, *yaoi*, and BL—will be quite useful in characterizing contemporary BL practices.

Two Perspectives: Why Did a Misunderstanding Occur?

The four distinct genres referred to above emerged at different times, in different media, and possess different generic qualities, as James Welker has outlined elsewhere in this volume. *Shōnen'ai* works were published in general *shōjo manga* in the 1970s and early 1980s, while *JUNE*, published from 1978 until 1996, was a commercial magazine specializing in male–male romance.[3] By the middle of the 1980s, the use of the term "*yaoi*" had become established to refer to these narratives both in amateur *dōjinshi* (coterie magazines) that parodied existing *shōnen* manga and *anime*, as well as in original *dōjinshi* depicting male–male romance. Finally, "boys love" (*bōizu rabu*), or BL, generally refers to commercially produced works after around 1992 of original (that is, not parodic) prose fiction and manga. Works dealing with gender necessarily reflect the gender situation of the time, and the author's age (the era in which the author was born) also surely impacts the treatment of gender in her works. Furthermore, the expression of ideas in works appearing in commercial manga magazines and works that, from the beginning, are aimed at an audience of one's peers, also naturally differ.

I will begin my argument with an excerpt from my article, "Transgender: Female Hermaphrodites and Male Androgynes." The passage given below is the main portion of the article in which I discuss *shōnen'ai*.

> . . . as I noted . . . in the section on cross-dressing young women, for girls sex is first and foremost about "fear," and not desire. Even supposing that there were in a girl some mechanism leading toward "desire," that impulse would be controlled by social sanctions, such as the idea that it is "shameless." As a result there certainly is "a big difference between a girl and a woman," and this is again overshadowed by the fear of sexual maturity. . . . There is no question that this group of *shōnen-ai* works was born out of the "hatred of females" that is shared by all women. However, when these expressions of female-hating come out of the mouths of these fictional beautiful boys, readers hear a dissonant note, and have their attention drawn thereby to the position that women are forced to occupy in society, whether they like it or not. That is, the hatred of females is turned around, the mechanisms by which women cannot help falling into a state of self-hatred are exposed, and a bright light is cast on women's situation. . . .
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> Moreover, by taking the form of shōnen-ai, shōjo manga were able to enter the domain of "sexuality," which had formerly been taboo. . . . By applying this characteristic to a male body, and by also setting the narrative on a stage completely separated from reality, [highly influential artist] Takemiya [Keiko] has succeeded in depicting this theme in a purified form and in a way that protects the reader from its raw pain. To borrow the words of Ueno Chizuko, male homosexual love "is a safety device that girls use to manage the dangerous weapon of sexuality by separating themselves from their own bodies; it provides wings for girls to fly."
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> This will become even clearer if we look at the "yaoi" subgenre. . . . These yaoi narratives overflow with sex to an unprecedented degree. . . . Shōnen-ai has made it possible for young women to "play with sex." Here in yaoi, the bitter pain associated with the monuments of shōnen-ai manga has already disappeared, and young women happily squeal, "Oooh, how obscene," while indulging themselves in "dangerous" and "forbidden" liaisons between men. . . .
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> By vicariously taking the form of young male lovers, young women no longer have to see themselves as the only ones suffering pain, even if rape or SM is being portrayed. . . . But the most important thing is that through this means women are freed from the position of always being the one "done to,"

> and are able to take on the viewpoint of the "doer," and also the viewpoint of the "looker." This is an extremely significant transformation. For now, *yaoi* has not moved beyond the level of these safe simulations of extreme male–female relations, but it is possible that these depictions of sadomasochistic *shōnen-ai* will cause the emergence of real-life women who assault men.[4]

In the section subsequent to the paragraphs excerpted above, I suggest that a search for "ultimate love" and the desire to pursue a pure relationship provide the background for the emergence of such works. Leaving that argument aside for the time being, here I would like to emphasize two points I made in this article:

1. *Shōnen'ai* first emerged as a mechanism offering an escape from the social realities of gender suppression and the avoidance of sex(uality);
2. Once it had emerged, however, the same mechanism made it possible for girls to "play with sex(uality)" (*sei o asobu*) and opened up possibilities for them to shift their own point of view from passive to active engagement.

The main point I would like to emphasize regarding these two assertions is that the first corresponds to the structure of *shōnen'ai*, while the second corresponds to the development of *yaoi*. Again and again, it has only been my first point above that receives attention, and in extreme cases my argument has been classified together with the so-called "simulation theory" (*shimyureeshon setsu*), which posits that for girls who have yet to experience sex, *shōnen'ai* is nothing more than a dress rehearsal that safely simulates sex before the actual experience. However, I have never offered such an argument. When I wrote that previous article twenty years ago, it was already known even then that some women become interested in *yaoi* after they have married and have children. For this reason, I have never once said (and would never say) that *shōnen'ai* is a safe simulation of physical sexual experience.

To be clear, in the section dealing with my second assertion above, I wrote: "For now, *yaoi* has not moved beyond the level of these safe simulations of extreme male–female relations." In this case, by "extreme male–female relations" I was not referring to ordinary sexual relations but was instead referring to relations involving things such as rape, incest, or hardcore SM that would cause a person to hesitate before becoming physically involved. Use of the word "simulation" seems to have given rise to a misunderstanding. Then, an article published in 1995 classified my work as "simulation theory," which served to reproduce the misunderstanding.[5]

However, it certainly cannot be said that there was no basis for the misunderstanding. I say this because I recall that at the time I wrote that article I was relatively more concerned with the emergence of *shōnen'ai* as an escape from the social realities of gender suppression and the avoidance of sex(uality). At the same time, of course, the tendency toward "playing with sex(uality)" in *yaoi dōjinshi* had also become clear, but I did not have the impression at that time that any impressive, high-caliber *yaoi dōjinshi* had been produced.

More specifically, this was my impression after reading dozens of *yaoi* anthologies published by Comic Box focused on the 1980s and 1990s manga and anime series including *Captain Tsubasa* (*Kyaputen Tsubasa*), *Yoroiden Samurai Troopers* (*Yoroiden samurai torūpaa*), *Legend of Heavenly Sphere Shurato* (*Tenkū senki Shurato*), and *Saint Seiya* (*Seinto Seiya*).[6] Of course, there were some interesting works among these, and some noteworthy authors, but I did not yet think that within this genre a significant number of particularly interesting works would start to appear one after another.[7]

Looking back now, I can appreciate that Kōga Yun's works were exceedingly innovative at that time.[8] However, at the point I learned that she had already debuted in a commercial magazine, I still had not clearly perceived the level of her work. Furthermore, at that time many *yaoi* works still simply inscribed the patterns of dramatic, extreme relationships between men and women onto relationships between men. The anthologies I read presented "selected works" of *yaoi dōjinshi*; as such—as works written by amateurs—most of them tended to repeat the same patterns, which I found to be boring. The works had potential, but their efforts had not yet been perfected; that was my impression at the time. In reality, however, that *yaoi* scene went on to produce many outstanding works and artists, and was ultimately able to significantly shift perspectives and make it possible for girls to "play with sex(uality)."[9] Both *yaoi* and BL, the commercial development of *yaoi*, began to thrive in a way I was not able to foresee at the time.

"Girls Dressed as Boys" and "Boys Dressed as Girls"

In addition to the fact that the development of my second assertion above was still unknown to me, there is another reason why, at that time, I was focused on the motif of "fear of sex(uality)" (*sei e no osore*) and posited that such fear amounted to a "fear of maturity" (*seijuku e no osore*), tantamount to misogyny. The reason for my supposition is that when I began to wonder about taking up the figure of the *shōnen* (boy) rather than the *shōjo* (girl), I realized that it would be necessary to trace the connections back to earlier images of "girls dressed as boys" (*dansō no shōjo*). In other words, I asked why, in standard *shōjo* manga, do girls pose as boys?

In almost all cases, the "girls dressed as boys" in *shōjo* manga do so in order to achieve a social status or take on a social role that would be denied to them as women. In other words, it can be said that the basis for taking on male appearance stems from gender inequality, and that such characters are rather strongly inscribed with an opposition to conventional gender roles. In most cases, however, the heroine abandons her male disguise when she falls in love. That is, such characters do not want to return to being girls in society, but do want to be seen as girls by their love interests. Conversely, it can be said that they want to appear as girls in front of their love interests, but otherwise prefer to remain disguised as men. Another way of saying this would be that the *shōjo* affirms and accepts her own femininity only when she falls in love. In this regard, the *shōjo* considers her male appearance to be a symbol of her denial of sexuality and her reluctance to positively accept her female gender.

In any case, the figure of the boy (*shōnen*) represents the *shōjo*'s internal refusal of her own female gender. By projecting sexual attributes onto this figure of the boy, which is assumed to be essentially non-sexual, the *shōjo* becomes sexually liberated. At the time I thought: Of course! What an obvious solution. Now, however, I think that I probably should have given more serious thought to the significance of projecting sexual attributes onto the ostensibly non-sexual figure of the boy—that is, the significance of not wanting to have a romantic relationship as a female.

In those days, I thought that it would be a good idea to think about the connections between *shōjo* manga featuring male protagonists in love with other males (otherwise known as "*shōnen'ai*") and authors' motivations to create works with a "girls dressed as boys" motif. Since a "fear of sex(uality)" and a sense of taboo surrounding sex still remained quite strong in Japanese society in general from the 1970s until the late 1980s, as well as in *shōjo* manga as a whole, my writing at that time might have been influenced by this socio-gender situation. While it may sound a bit contradictory, I still believe, somehow, that specific works dealing with serious romantic motifs belong to the genealogy of "girls dressed as boys" in terms of demonstrating an inherent drive to escape from being forced to fit into a defined "female gender."

On the other hand, there is also a genealogy of works featuring "boys dressed as girls" to consider, pioneered by such 1970s works as Kishi Yūko's *Tamasaburō's Love Capriccio* (*Tamasaburō koi no kyōsōkyoku*) and Naka Tomoko's *The Beautiful Flower Princess* (*Hana no bijo hime*).[10] Actually, in a

1991 article I suggested that the transition from an earnest and serious style of depicting beautiful homosexuals in *shōnen'ai* toward a type of parody and playfulness was strongly influenced by earlier works featuring "beautiful boys dressed as girls" (*josō suru bishōnen*).[11] At that time it was no more than a hunch, but as I have since studied the development of *yaoi* and BL, and done some fan-based field research, I have become more and more certain that my second point above (regarding the development of *yaoi* and BL) should be considered in terms of the genealogy of "boys dressed as girls."

To summarize, in thinking about the emergence of *shōnen'ai* as detailed in my first point above, the serious works considered to be *shōnen'ai* masterpieces usually come to mind (for example, Takemiya Keiko's *The Song of the Wind and the Trees* [*Kaze to ki no uta*] and Yamagishi Ryōko's *Emperor of the Land of the Rising Sun* [*Hi izuru tokoro no tenshi*]), and the motives behind the creation of such works have frequently been explained (including by myself) in terms of resistance to gender suppression, the desire for equality in relationships, and/or the search for the ultimate couple.[12] These earnest motives were also deeply, though imperfectly, related to the "girls dressed as boys" motif. (Of course, the genre of *shōnen'ai* emerged precisely because there are subjects that cannot be adequately addressed by "girls dressed as boys" works; in particular, the themes "equality in relationships" and "ultimate couple" are especially difficult to implement using "girls dressed as boys.")

Running parallel to the serious *shōnen'ai* works are works sometimes known as "beautiful homosexual works" (*bi-kei homosekushuaru mono*).[13] This subgenre includes many comedic works such as *Eve's Sons* (*Ibu no musukotachi*), by Aoike Yasuko, and *Patalliro!* (*Patariro!*), by male *shōjo* manga artist Maya Mineo.[14] The characteristics of these works clearly indicate that they descended from the genealogy of "boys dressed as girls."[15] In the later evolution of *yaoi* and BL, we can see the increasingly vivid hues of the "boys dressed as girls" lineage.[16] For example, in both *yaoi dōjinshi* and BL, the number of light comedies has been increasing.[17] In addition, it seems that the characteristics of the male heroes in such stories are gradually shifting from representing "a projection of the *shōjo*'s inner self" to "making fun of men" and even "playing with men." This shift seems to indicate that the taste of growing numbers of artists is more in line with "teasing men" than with "identifying with men." Actually, in this regard there is a common thread with the earlier works dealing with "boys dressed as girls."[18]

These days, no matter how I think about it, I get the feeling that many male heroes don't represent the "*shōjo*'s alter ego." (Could it be that they represent the "old man inside of me," as many Japanese women joke between themselves?) I also have the feeling that, putting aside the question of whether such a man really exists or not, in many cases authors choose to model their characters on "real men." (I sense this tendency in works featuring salarymen or middle-aged men as protagonists, or works of *rōjin moe* [feelings of desire toward old men], for example). Of course, there are many works that deal with "the *shōjo*'s inner self," but just as women's observations of men are undoubtedly becoming more astute, the otherness of male protagonists is also becoming more pronounced.

In other words, in the twenty years that have elapsed since I wrote that first article, the "potential" that I first detected (but had yet to be achieved) has taken a slightly different shape than I first imagined, but the resulting development of *yaoi* and BL has exceeded my expectations. Furthermore, while the origin of this development lies in the genealogy of "girls dressed as boys," the present results were achieved more successfully by incorporating the genealogy of "boys dressed as girls" into their works. This is the point which should be emphasized.

A Theory of Yaoi Fiction: A Turning Point and Two Perspectives

Above, I wrote that my first main point corresponds to the structure of *shōnen'ai*, while the second corresponds to the development of *yaoi* and BL. To elaborate on this, it can also be said that each of these points corresponds to the following questions, respectively:

1. Why did a series of works dealing with "love between men" for female readers emerge?
2. What possibilities did this emergence offer?

In fact, the approach suggested by these two questions overlaps perfectly with the shift in emphasis undertaken by Nagakubo Yōko in her groundbreaking 2005 book, *A Theory of* Yaoi *Fiction* (*Yaoi shōsetsu ron*).[19]

This book is truly outstanding. Based on her doctoral dissertation, her arguments are substantiated by precise statistical analysis. Nagakubo does not ask the same psychological and sociological questions that previous researchers (including myself) have tended to ask—namely, "*Why* do women prefer to read works treating 'love between men?'" Instead, she makes use of detailed analysis and statistics to reveal the structures of the genre, thus shedding light on the question "What possibilities have emerged as a result?" and capturing the very essence of the genre. In other words, her approach represents a complete shift in point of view from my first to my second question, above.

While this might seem like a minor point at first glance, it was, in fact, a remarkable shift in thinking about *yaoi*. In answer to the "why" question, explanations such as "as a result of gender oppression" or "because male homosexuality makes it possible to write differently than in hetero works" tended to produce theories that focused on addressing a negative gap or lack. Such theories cannot adequately address statements frequently heard among the current generation of *yaoi* fans, asserting that they do *not* feel gender oppression and that they enjoy *yaoi* simply because it is "interesting." If we consider the possibility that their enjoyment of *yaoi* might derive from the "boys dressed as girls" genealogy, typical theories based on the "why" questions are even less relevant. Of course, the argument that *yaoi* emerged as a response to gender oppression is not essentially wrong, but the shift in perspective offered by Nagakubo is significant in that it makes possible discussions of *yaoi* and BL in terms other than as a response to gender repression.

In her analysis of the 381 *yaoi* fiction works published in 1996, Nagakubo compared depictions of *seme* (top, dominant) and *uke* (bottom, passive) characters in terms of gender characteristics. She found that while *seme* characters were essentially masculine and *uke* characters were essentially feminine, both *seme* and *uke* characters demonstrated a mixture of masculine and feminine traits. The significance of Nagakubo's findings lies precisely in what she calls the "prescribed mixture of the characteristics of both sexes."

Furthermore, she found that the *seme* and *uke* sexual roles in a same-sex couple are determined by the very contrast between them. That is, the same person can be either a "prince" or a "princess" depending on who their partner is. This, she claims, is why coupling is so important in *yaoi* fiction. In other words, no matter how much a *seme–uke* couple may appear to imitate traditional masculine–feminine gender roles, the differences between them are no more than idiosyncrasies brought about by grouping the two together. The couple is, therefore, free from the oppression of sexual difference. This made it possible, Nagakubo argues, for readers to enjoy—for the first time—"masculinity" and "femininity" free from any sense of oppression. In this regard, Nagakubo says what works of *yaoi* fiction aspire to is the "amusementization of gender" (*jendaa no gorakuka*).

"Playing with Gender"

The "amusementization of gender"! While *yaoi* had previously been described as the "amusementization of sex" (*sei/sekkusu no gorakuka*), it had never before been described as "the amusementization of gender" (*sei-sa/*

jendaa no gorakuka). Indeed, it is the "amusementization of gender" that really is at the heart of the matter. *Seme* and *uke* characters each possess their own sort of gender ambiguity, and true enjoyment comes from the various patterns of *seme–uke* coupling and the "prescribed mixture of the characteristics of both sexes."

In her article "*Yaoi* as Seen from the Perspective of Manga for Boys and Young Men" ("*Seishōnen manga kara miru yaoi*"), Watanabe Yumiko writes:

> The strong and the weak are not determined by a single standard. Each character is measured according to three different scales: society, corporeality, and spirituality. These three factors combine to create a rich system of personal relationships based on subtle power balances. For example, a character with a higher status in society might be spiritually "inferior" to his partner, and therefore depends upon his partner in some way.[20]

Watanabe's assessment is accurate. A wealth of *yaoi* terms have come into being to describe various relationship patterns, such as "*sasoi uke*" (an individual who is mentally *seme* but physically *uke*), "*hetare zeme*" (a loser *seme*), "*jō uke*" (a proud *uke* queen), "*keigo zeme*" (a *seme* who talks to his partner using honorific language), "*yancha uke*" (a naughty *uke*), or "*gekokujō*" (when an *uke* overcomes a *seme*). All of these terms are inherently contradictory, highlighting two different personality traits held by the same character.

When I pointed out that "male–male romance" made a shift in perspective possible, in which "women are freed from the position of always being the one 'done to,' and are able to take on the viewpoint of the 'doer,' and also the viewpoint of the 'looker,'" and wondered if, as a result, "women wouldn't slowly become accustomed to this new acquisition of the active position of the looker," I was still only thinking of a simple reversal in perspective from "passive" to "active."[21] However, the new expressive tools of *yaoi* and BL offer a phenomenon that is already several steps ahead—namely, "the amusementization of gender." The fundamental *seme–uke* rule provides only that a *seme* character and an *uke* character exist. After that, in an all-male world in which no biological sexual difference exists, creators of *yaoi* and BL make couplings by freely combining all sorts of gender factors and power dynamics as they like. Readers, for their part, are able to search for their own preferred couplings among all the possibilities offered. For both readers and creators, this is the pleasure of *yaoi* and BL: a thoroughly gender-blended world.

Yaoi and BL flourish, then, as accumulations of experiments carried out in *shōjo* manga—experiments in transgressing every possible border of sexual difference and in creating worlds of diverse polymorphic perversion, as Rio

Otomo demonstrates in her chapter in this volume. On the other hand, compared with *shōjo* manga, which are frequently set in fantastic or sci-fi situations, *yaoi* and BL works typically take up realistic "daily life" situations. (Of course, love stories featuring unrealistic Middle Eastern millionaires have become quite popular, and there are examples of parody *yaoi* based on original works of science fiction, but in these cases the fundamental approach seems to treat daily life within existing settings, without changing the original setting or world view).

In particular, there is a long tradition of rereading original works through *yaoi* parody. In this regard, the possibility of reinterpreting "daily life" through the same *yaoi* lens opens up before us, as Patrick Galbraith explores in his chapter in this volume. For instance, looking at scenes like two boys walking happily in town, two boys who are physically close to each other, or two boys emotionally attracted to each other, girls'/women's homoerotic fantasies are expanded. Recently, *yaoi* reinterpretations of relationships between middle-aged male politicians have appeared. When I read Sugiura Yumiko's interpretation of influential Liberal Democratic Party figure Ozawa Ichirō as a *sō-uke no hime* (an inveterate *uke* regardless of who he is paired with), I thought, "Ah! Of course!"[22] I have also recently been hearing about people who find themselves to be unintentionally reading accounts in the business and economics newspaper *Nikkei shinbun* of the various dealings and relationships between political and business leaders from a *yaoi* point of view.[23] Headlines that seem to suggest *yaoi* reinterpretations do certainly appear plentiful! While those who engage in such *yaoi*-inspired rereadings may not be aware of it, in the act of reinterpreting what Eve Sedgwick calls homosocial male bonding as homosexuality, it seems to me that a certain parodic point of view emerges.[24] Clearly, such rereadings amount to women looking back at and examining male-dominated society.[25]

At the same time, I am reminded of Kaneda Junko's 2007 article, "Manga *Dōjinshi*: The Politics of Communities' Collective Interpretation."[26] As Kaneda points out, "some *yaoi* theories consider *yaoi* to represent an escape from sex or a hatred of women. However, if we look closely, what *yaoi* avoids or escapes from is not sex or femininity, but the look which sees women simply as sex objects."[27] Women escape from the gaze that sees them only as sex objects, and the gaze they return imbues homosocial male bonding with sexual implications. As Kawahara Kazuko has insightfully observed, "*yaoi* is a re-interpretation of *shōnen* manga from a *shōjo* manga point of view."[28] Thus, as Kaneda points out, as parody, *yaoi* functions as a forum for "communities' collective interpretation" and thus expresses a wide range of critical attitudes toward women. Kaneda's use of the term "communities' collective interpretation" demonstrates an incisive grasp of this aspect of *yaoi*.

As we saw in the case of "girls dressed as boys," a woman who takes on the appearance of a man does so in order to cope with a desperate situation. However, the actions of both *putting* men into women's clothing and rereading male bonding in a sexual way reverse normative power relations in a parodic way. This very act of reversal is simply interesting.

Here again, I would like to reiterate that this kind of women's engagement in male–male relationships originated after the establishment of *yaoi* in the mid-1980s, and developed with the establishment of the generic convention of ***uke–seme*** and the recognition of "male–male romance" as a means of fostering shared imaginations among specific girls/women. This development, in turn, enhanced the emergence of its successor, BL. It is precisely this development of *yaoi* and BL that answers the second question above—namely, "what possibilities did this emergence (the device of 'male–male romance') offer?"

The flow of the discussion so far can be rephrased as follows. Beginning with the creation of a new form of expression in response to earnest internal motivations, diverse critical responses making use of this new form of expression then developed. Needless to say, there is a difference between the energy of generating something from nothing, and—after certain tools have been established—the energy to use those tools in certain ways. Motivating factors are also different.

It follows, then, that a theoretical analysis of *shōnen'ai* works, for example, and an analysis of *yaoi* or BL works from the mid-1990s or later, will reach different conclusions. In fact, the history of theoretical approaches to *shōnen ai*, *yaoi*, and BL reveals that changes in analyses that define the characteristics of each genre are simply grouped together with changes in the character of the objects of analysis. For instance, studies conducted by young researchers since 2000 frequently emphasize the entertainment factor of male–male romance and criticize earlier studies focused on gender oppression. However, most studies prior to the 1990s were in fact aimed at analyses of *shōnen'ai* or *JUNE*, while the young researchers today are analyzing contemporary *yaoi* or BL.[29] Thus, in most cases the objects of research in the earlier and current studies are different. It goes without saying that an analysis of the earlier *shōnen'ai* or *JUNE* would not be not applicable to the current situation of *yaoi* or BL. Even though all of these genres deal with male–male romance, the young researchers of today should be more aware of the need to state in greater detail which genre their own analyses address.

As an example, in her article "*Yaoi* Fiction as Women's 'Rotten' Dreams: Positive and Negative Attributes of *Yaoi* Fiction," which appeared in the special edition of *Eureka*, "*Fujoshi* Manga Compendium," Nagakubo writes: "For authors of *JUNE* fiction, a scenario of male–male romance is simply chosen as a means of expression, not because they intend to create a concrete manifestation of this [*JUNE*] methodology. Authors of *JUNE* fiction write for themselves, not for like-minded readers they have not yet met." "*Yaoi* fiction, on the other hand," Nagakubo continues, "*are* produced for readers. . . . An author of *yaoi* must try to create a story with a *yaoi* motif that matches both readers' desires and her own as much as possible, and then must give expression to it using her own personality and technique. It is rather close to the realm of craftsmanship."[30]

I found Nagakubo's discussion of this point to be quite interesting. Counter to this, it has also been argued that "all expressions are self-expressions. We can't make such distinctions as '*JUNE* fiction works are self-expressions,' but '*yaoi* fiction works are craftsmanship.'"[31] However, for the reasons I have already stated, I think that it is important to analyze the characteristics of each genre together with a consideration of the publication venue and the year of publication. In addition, it is interesting to note that Nagakubo's attempt to make a distinction between "*JUNE* fiction" and "*yaoi* fiction" seems to overlap with the two points I have been coming back to again and again.

Gender as a Restraining Device: *Yaoi* and BL as "Pressure Point Devices"

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that now more than ever gender oppression has come to function as an invisible restraining device for women. Of course, there are people in every generation who are conscious of being oppressed. Compared with those who grew up in the generations when oppression was easily seen and felt, younger generations are not able to see and feel oppression as easily. However, in *yaoi* and BL the invisible restraints of gender are released. It both feels good and is interesting. Now, oppression is not clearly seen, and can only begin to be felt once the restraints are loosened. What's more, because even the restraints can't clearly be seen, some people aren't even aware that it's when the restraints are loosened that they begin to feel better. In the words of artist Yoshinaga Fumi, it is truly the case that "the pressure points for women differ from person to person."[32] For precisely this reason, each reader's preferred couplings and story patterns differ.

Yaoi and BL offer a space in which the restraints of gender oppression can be removed. Even more than that, like a custom-made tool for relieving pressure points, *yaoi* and BL allow readers to keep certain gender features as they choose, while releasing those stiff points of built-up pressure. This custom-made "pressure point device" allows each reader to enjoy her own preferred arrangement of "the prescribed mixture of the characteristics of both sexes."[33] Thinking about it in this way, we can think of *yaoi* and BL as exploring the question "Which coupling represents your favorite gender blend?" For this reason, female attempts to play with gender in these genres cannot be explained in terms of more general, visible forms of gender oppression. This is because desired gender features, and even self-conscious gender features, differ from person to person. However, we can each choose the combination that makes up our favorite gender blend. That is the pressure point. That is what the device of male–male romance makes possible.

Notes

1. "Transujendaa: Onna no ryōsei guyū otoko no han'inyō" [Transgender: Female hermaphrodites and male androgynes] originally appeared in *Gendai no esupuri*, no. 277 (August 1991) and was reprinted in Fujimoto Yukari, *Watashi no ibasho wa doko ni aru no? Shōjo manga ga utsusu kokoro no katachi* [Where do I belong? The shape of the heart reflected in shōjo manga] (Tokyo: Gakuyō shobō, 1998), 130–76. An English translation was published as "Transgender: Female Hermaphrodites and Male Androgynes," trans. Linda Flores and Kazumi Nagaike, *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 27 (2004).

2. Fujimoto, *Watashi no ibasho*; a "*bunko*" paperback version was issued by Asahi shinbun shuppan in 2008.

3. As mentioned above, works published in *JUNE* did not necessarily depict "love between men" (*otoko dōshi no ai*). For the moment, however, I will leave that point aside.

4. Excerpted from Fujimoto, "Transgender," 84–87.

5. See Tanigawa Tamae [Mizuma Midory], "Josei no shōnen ai shikō ni tsuite II: Shikisha no kenkai to, feminizumu ni aru kanōsei" [On women's preference for *shōnen'ai*, part 2: Expert opinions and feminist possibilities], *Joseigaku nenpō* 14 (1995).

6. E.g., *Tsubasa hyakkaten* [Tsubasa department store], *Bessatsu komikku bokkusu*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Fyūjon purodakuto, 1987); *Torūpaa hana fubuki* [Trooper flower blizzard], *Torūpaa dōjinshi kessaku ansorojii*, vol. 1 (Fyūjon purodakuto, 1989); *Shurato makū gensō* [Shurato enchanted sky fantasy], *Shurato dōjinshi kessaku ansorojii*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Fyūjon purodakuto, 1990); and *Seiya ni muchū!* [Mad for Seiya!], *Bessatsu komikku bokkusu*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Fyūjon purodakuto, 1987).

7. To be clear, I did find significant possibility in terms of *yaoi* fiction as a sensual expression. The first time I went to the Comic Market, I was deeply impressed by this possibility, and I purchased a *dōjinshi* magazine by Yamaai Shikiko. She was still unknown at the time, and I didn't even have to wait in line to buy her *dōjinshi*. After that, she became a famous writer in the BL sphere almost overnight.

8. Kōga was extremely popular at *dōjinshi* markets in the late 1980s, and has since become an important presence as a professional manga artist. A number of her works have been published in English translation, such as her series *Loveless*, 12 vols., ongoing, 2001– (Tokyo: Ichijinsha, 2002–), and *Aashian* [Earthian], released as *Kanketsuban Aashian* [The complete version of Earthian], 5 vols. (Tokyo: Sōbisha, 2002–2008); she also designed characters for the anime *Gundam 00* (broadcast 2007–2009).

9. My use of the term "*yaoi*" here is meant to indicate any works published in *dōjinshi*, without distinguishing between original works and parodies.

10. Kishi Yūko, *Tamasaburō koi no kyōsōkyoku* [Tamasaburō's love capriccio], 4 vols. (1972–1979; Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1976–1978); Naka Tomoko, *Hana no bijo hime* [Beautiful flower princesses], 3 vols. (1974–1976; Tokyo: Furawaa komikkusu, 1977).

11. See Fujimoto Yukari, "Shōjo manga ni okeru '*shōnen'ai*' no imi" [The meaning of "*shōnen'ai*" in *shōjo* manga), *Nyū feminizumu rebyū* 2 (1991): 280–284.

12. Takemiya Keiko, *Kaze to ki no uta* [The song of the wind and the trees], 10 vols. (1976–1984; Tokyo: Hakusensha bunko, 1995); Yamagishi Ryōko, *Hi izuru tokoro no tenshi* [Emperor of the land of the rising sun], 11 vols. (1980–1984; Tokyo: Hana to yume komikkusu, 1980–1984).

13. At first, I thought about using the term "comedies of beautiful homosexuals" (*bi-kei homosekushuaru komedi*), but since works such as Kihara Toshie's *Mari to Shingo* [Mari and Shingo], 13 vols. (1977–1984; Tokyo: Hana to yume komikkusu, 1979–1984), can be considered to exist somewhere in between *shōnen'ai* works and "comedies of beautiful homosexuals," I have decided to use the intentionally vague "beautiful homosexual works" here.

14. Aoike Yasuko, *Ibu no musuko-tachi* [Eve's sons], 7 vols. (1975–1979; Tokyo: Purinsesu komikkusu, 1976–1979); Maya Mineo, *Patariro!* [*Patalliro!*], 91 vols., ongoing (1978–; Tokyo: Hana to yume komikkusu, 1981–).

15. In the broadest sense, then, it is possible to think of "beautiful homosexual works" as belonging to the *shōnen'ai* genre. In other words, it can also be said that the genre of *shōnen'ai*, broadly conceived, includes both the serious works of the "girls dressed as boys" genealogy as well as the more comedic works of the "boys dressed as girls" genealogy.

16. In fact, in the development of *yaoi* and BL, the "girls dressed as boys" and "boys dressed as girls" lineages were occasionally mixed together in a single work, and the latter gradually came to have a stronger influence.

17. In this regard, there is some overlap between the debate surrounding the genealogy of "boys dressed as girls" and Yamada Tomoko's discussion of "homoerotic comedies" in "*Fujoshi* Manga Compendium" [Fujoshi manga taikei], a 2007 special issue of the literary journal *Eureka* [*Yuriika*]. Calling works by Kishi Yūko and Naka Tomoko "homo-esque comedies" (*homo-chikku komedi*), Yamada writes, "The roots of BL, in the sense of the 'cheerful *yaoi*' that has become mainstream today, may in fact lie in the confused, glamorous, and beautiful worlds depicted by Kihara, Aoike, Kishi, and Naka—worlds which are not bound by gender or nationality and in which anything can happen, rather than in the balanced, controlled, and bounded worlds depicted by Hagio, Takemiya, and Yamagishi." See Yamada Tomoko, "Pre-'yaoi/BL' to iu shiten kara: 'o-hanabatake' o junbi shita sakkatachi'" [Perspectives on 'pre-*yaoi*/BL': Artists preparing 'flower gardens' for their descendants], *Yuriika* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 129.

18. However, when "boys dressed as girls" come to be typically cast as the "protagonist's boyfriend," as in Kawahara Yumiko's *Zenryaku: Miruku hausu* [Dispensing with formalities: Milk house], 10 vols. (Tokyo: Furawaa komikkusu, 1983–1986), even within the same genre of

"boys dressed as girls," a heroine's emotional attachment toward such a "boyfriend" increases, and the viewpoint that this amounts to "playing with the existence of boys/men" is a step backward.

19. Nagakubo Yōko, *Yaoi shōsetsu ron: Josei no tame no erosu hyōgen* [The analysis of *yaoi* fiction: Erotic representations for women] (Tokyo: Senshū daigaku shuppankyoku, 2005).

20. Watanabe Yumiko, "Seishōnen manga kara miru yaoi" [*Yaoi* as seen from the perspective of manga for boys and young men], *Yuriika* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 72.

21. Fujimoto, "Transgender," 87; Fujimoto, "*Shōjo* manga ni okeru '*shōnen'ai*,'" 284.

22. Sugiura Yumiko, *Otaku joshi kenkyū: Fujoshi shisō taikei* [*Otaku* girls research: A compendium of *fujoshi* thought] (Tokyo: Hara shobō, 2006). This book has been frequently criticized on the grounds that she often misreads details, but I find this section of her work to be exceptionally interesting.

23. The *Nikkei shinbun*, primarily read by businessmen, can be thought of as "Japan's *Wall Street Journal*." Relationships among those in the business and political arenas are frequently the subject of *Nikkei* articles.

24. See Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

25. In the "*Fujoshi* manga compendium" issue of *Eureka*, Yoshimoto Taimatsu writes that "the existence of BL has shown men that they are the object of 'the returned gaze.' Paradoxically, this has led to an awareness (among men) that women are tightly bound by the male gaze, and that they themselves objectify women in the same way." See Yoshimoto Taimatsu, "Otoko mo sunaru bōizu rabu" [Men also do BL], *Yuriika* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 110.

26. Kaneda Junko, "Manga dōjinshi: Kaishaku kyōdōtai no poritikusu" [Manga *dōjinshi*: The politics of communities' collective interpretation], in *Bunka no shakai gaku*, ed. Satō Kenji and Yoshimi Shun'ya (Tokyo: Yūhikaku, 2007).

27. Kaneda, "Manga dōjinshi," 177. Kaneda's article itself is exceptionally well-argued and her analysis is superb, but I find it necessary to point out again here that the various works/genres tied together under the heading of the so-called "*yaoi* debate" (*yaoi ronsō*) all have different objects of analysis.

28. Kawahara Kazuko, "Manga to ren'ai/otaku: Make inu to ren'ai" [Manga and love/*otaku*: Losers and love," paper delivered at the July 2005 meeting of *Mangashi kenkyū kai* (The research group on manga history). Kawahara's paper focused on the early stage of *shōnen'ai* and *yaoi*. Similarly, Nakajima Azusa has also written that "from the time the world of the *shōnen* was invaded by *shōjo* fantasies, it had already ceased to be a 'tournament arena' and had been transformed into a space of strange desires and love for love's sake" in her *Tanatosu no kodomotachi: Kajō tekiō no seitaigaku* [The children of Thanatos: The ecology of excessive adaptation] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1998), 174.

29. For example, most works discussed by Nakajima Azusa in her *Komyunikēshon fuzen shōkōgun* [Communication dysfunction syndrome] (Tokyo: Chikuma shōbō, 1991) are *shōnen'ai* or *JUNE* works, and her subsequent *The Children of Thanatos* uses the word "*yaoi*" but deals with works by creators coming out of the *JUNE* lineage and fiction and manga then newly coming out under the "boys love" label. Furthermore, almost all of the works analyzed by Ueno Chizuko in the chapter "Experimental love in a genderless world" ("Jendaaresu waarudo no ai no jikken") in her *Hatsujō sōchi: Erosu no shinario* [The erotic apparatus: Erotic scenarios] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1998), 125–54, were published in mainstream *shōjo* manga magazines—in other words, works in the *shonen'ai* genealogy.

30. Nagakubo Yōko, "Josei-tachi no 'kusatta yume' *yaoi* shōsetsu: Yaoi shōsetsu no miryoku to sono mondaisei" [*Yaoi* fiction as women's "rotten" dreams: Positive and negative attributes of *yaoi* fiction], *Yuriika* 39, no. 7 (June 2007): 146.

31. This opinion was expressed at the party celebrating the publication of *Eureka*'s "*Fujoshi* manga compendium."

32. See Miura Shion and Yoshinaga Fumi, "Miura Shion and Yoshinaga Fumi taidan: 'Feminizumu wa yappari kankeinakunai no yo'" [A conversation between Miura Shion and Yoshinaga Fumi: "It is not unrelated to feminism"], in Yoshinaga Fumi, *Yoshinaga Fumi taidanshū: Ano hito to koko dake no oshaberi* (Tokyo: Ōta shuppan, 2007). Yoshinaga's works are discussed in Tomoko Aoyama's chapter in this volume.

33. Nagakubo, *Yaoi shōsetsu ron*, 52.